



WISCONSIN STATE REPRESENTATIVE

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95TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Testimony on AB 375 – La Crosse Theater Bill

Assembly Committee on Urban and Local Affairs

September 8, 2009

Good afternoon Chairwoman Berceau and members of the Assembly Committee on Urban and Local Affairs. Thank you for holding a public hearing on this bill.

AB 375 would provide a property tax exemption for land that is used in the construction of a new theater in La Crosse. The La Crosse Community Theater is a non-profit organization and has been a cornerstone of the La Crosse arts community since it first opened up in 1964.

While its current site was originally intended to be a temporary location when it opened, the theater has been housed in the same building since that time. Now, 45 years later, they have found that their current facility has far exceeded the end of its useful life. The Theater Board has been exploring ways to expand their facility since 2002, and I am pleased to say that their efforts have resulted in a very generous proposal from a local businessman who has offered to donate a parcel of land in Downtown La Crosse for a new theater.

This new property would be located near the Pump House Regional Arts Center and the loft housing for artists in the soon to be completed Grand River Transit Center. The addition of a new theater building to this growing arts district will help to strengthen our community and add to the social, cultural, and economic success of the region.

At its current location, the theater pays approximately \$6,000 per year in property taxes. This figure is estimated to increase to \$200,000 per year if a new theater was constructed without an exemption in place. While local property tax waivers have been considered, this option would not provide the Theater with the long-term financial stability that is needed to move forward with such a major project. A local waiver would be subject to annual review and would jeopardize the Theater's ability to attract donors for this project at this critical junction.



It is also worth noting that the Theater Board has taken steps to minimize the impact that this tax exemption would have on the city. Earlier this year, the Board voted unanimously to approve that a Payment-In-Lieu-Of-Taxes agreement be arranged with the city to cover the cost of basic city services such as fire and police protection which will help to limit the impact of this proposal on local property-tax payers.

This legislative proposal and the theater project have received broad support throughout the La Crosse community. Performances at the current theater are frequently sold-out, and major changes to the current building would be impractical and cost prohibitive. AB 375 has the support of many local businesses and sponsors who cite the Theater's presence as an important asset in their ability to attract and retain employees. This tax exemption is needed now so that the Theater Board can move forward with their construction plans and help to capitalize on this once in a lifetime opportunity.

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify before you and I appreciate this committee's consideration of AB 375. I am pleased to be joined today by Jackie Jensen-Utz, the Theater's Executive Director, Tom Brock, the current President of the Theater's Board of Directors, and John Lyche, the previous President of the Theater's Board of Directors, who can help to answer any questions you might have about this bill and the theater project.

Supporting Organizations:

Former La Crosse Mayor - Mark Johnsrud
Mayor of Onalaska - Michael Giese
La Crosse County Chairman - Steve Doyle
La Crosse Community Theatre Board of Directors - President Tom Brock
UW La Crosse - Chancellor Joe Gow
Viterbo University - President Richard Artman
Western Technical College - President Lee Rasch
Gundersen Lutheran - Senior VP of Operations and Human Resources Kathleen Klock
Logistics Health Incorporated - Chairman & CEO Donald Weber
La Crosse Chamber of Commerce - President Dick Granchalek
Downtown Mainstreet Inc. - Executive Director Bud Miyamoto
La Crosse Area Development Corporation - Executive Director James Hill
La Crosse Tribune - Publisher Rusty Cunningham
Kwik Trip, Inc. - VP of Operations Steve Loehr
United Fund for the Arts and Humanities - Executive Director Kathy Moen
Trust Point - Executive VP Darwin Isaacson
Altra Credit Union - President & CEO Gerald Forsythe
Piggy's Restaurant - Owner Chris Roderique
Smerud Artist & Photographer - Theresa Smerud